

Qin and Han Dynasties

Qin Dynasty

In 221 B.C., after ruling for over 20 years, the Qin ruler assumed the name Shi Huangdi (shihr hwahng•dee), which means “First Emperor.” The new emperor had begun his reign by halting the internal battles that had sapped China’s strength. Next he turned his attention to defeating invaders and crushing resistance within China to his rule. Shi Huangdi’s armies attacked the invaders north of the Huang He and south as far as what is now Vietnam. His victories doubled China’s size. Shi Huangdi was determined to unify China.

Shi Huangdi acted decisively to crush political opposition at home. To destroy the power of rival warlords, he introduced a policy called “strengthening the trunk and weakening the branches.” He commanded all the noble families to live in the capital city under his suspicious gaze. This policy, according to tradition, uprooted 120,000 noble families (this is one way he centralized the government). He also killed or banished those who opposed his rule.

To prevent criticism, Shi Huangdi murdered hundreds of Confucian scholars. They also ordered “useless” books burned. These books were the works of Confucian thinkers and poets who disagreed with the Legalists. Practical books about medicine and farming, however, were spared. Through measures such as these, Shi Huangdi established an **autocracy**—a government that has unlimited power and uses it in an arbitrary manner.



Centralizing the Government

Definition: a governing body consisting of a few individuals that has authority over all aspects of the economy and political system; governing body where the leader has ultimate power to make decisions without the need of public.

Shi Huangdi’s sweeping program of centralization included the building of a highway network of more than 4,000 miles. Also, he set the same standards throughout China for writing, law, currency, and weights and measures—even down to the length of cart axles. This last standard made sure that all vehicles could fit into the ruts of China’s main roads.

Under Shi Huangdi’s rule, irrigation projects increased farm production. Trade blossomed, thanks to the new road system. Trade pushed a new class of merchants into prominence. Despite these social advances, harsh taxes and repressive government made the Qin regime unpopular. Shi Huangdi had unified China at the expense of human freedom.

Great Wall of China

Scholars hated Shi Huangdi for his book burning. Poor people hated him because they were forced to work on the building of a huge defensive wall. Earlier, Zhou rulers had erected smaller walls to discourage attacks by northern nomads. Shi Huangdi determined to close the gaps and extend the wall almost the length of the empire’s border. Enemies would have to gallop halfway to Tibet to get around it.

The Great Wall of China arose on the backs of hundreds of thousands of peasants. The wall builders worked neither for wages nor for love of empire. They faced a terrible choice: work on the wall or die. Many of the laborers worked on the wall and died anyway, victims of the crushing labor or the harsh winter weather.

Han Dynasty

The Han Dynasty, which ruled China for more than 400 years, was so influential that even today many Chinese call themselves “people of the Han.”

Liu Bang’s, the Han’s first emperor, first goal was to destroy the rival kings’ power. He followed Shi Huangdi’s policy of establishing centralized government, in which a central authority controls the running of a state. Reporting to Liu Bang’s central government were hundreds of local provincials called commanderies.

When Liu Bang’s great-grandson took the throne, he continued Liu Bang’s centralizing policies. Wudi (woo•dee), who reigned from 141 to 87 B.C., held the throne longer than any other Han emperor. He is called the “Martial Emperor” because he adopted the policy of expanding the Chinese empire through war.

Wudi also colonized areas to the northeast, now known as Manchuria and Korea. He sent his armies south, where they conquered mountain tribes and set up Chinese colonies all the way into what is now Vietnam. By the end of Wudi’s reign, the empire had expanded nearly to the bounds of present-day China.

Structures of Han Government

The Chinese emperor relied on a complex **bureaucracy, government officials**, to help him rule. Running the bureaucracy and maintaining the imperial army were expensive. To raise money, the government levied taxes. Like the farmers in India, Chinese peasants owed part of their yearly crops to the government. Merchants also paid taxes.

Besides taxes, the peasants owed the government a month’s worth of labor or military service every year. With this source of labor, the Han emperors built roads and dug canals and irrigation ditches. The emperors also filled the ranks of China’s vast armies and expanded the Great Wall, which stretched across the northern frontier.

The Nine Chapter Law is the most important law in the Han Dynasty and had great influence on the laws in the Chinese history. The authorship of the law is most commonly attributed to Xiao He. This law code was developed at the beginning of the Han Dynasty and learned lessons from the cruel and complex laws of the Qin. The new laws were less cruel and brief. For instance, previous punishments like branding, amputation of the nose, and cutting off the toes were replaced with imprisonment, being beaten with bamboo, or the death penalty. It covered almost every type of legal situation that could arise.

Confucianism—Civil Service Exams

Wudi's government employed more than 130,000 people. The bureaucracy included 18 different ranks of **civil service jobs**, which were government jobs that civilians obtained by taking **examinations**. At times, Chinese emperors rewarded loyal followers with government posts. However, another way to fill government posts evolved under the Han. This method involved testing applicants' knowledge of Confucianism—the teachings of Confucius, who had lived 400 years before. Confucius had taught that gentlemen should practice “reverence [respect], generosity, truthfulness, diligence [industriousness], and kindness.” Because these were exactly the qualities he wanted his government officials to have, Wudi set up a school where hopeful job applicants from all over China could come to study Confucius's works.

After their studies, job applicants took formal examinations in history, law, literature, and Confucianism. In theory, anyone could take the exams. In practice, few peasants could afford to educate their sons. So sons of wealthy landowners had a chance at a government career. In spite of this flaw, the civil service system begun by Wudi worked so efficiently that it continued in China until 1912.

Technology Revolutionizes Chinese Life

Advances in technology influenced all aspects of Chinese life. Paper was invented in A.D. 105. Before that, books were usually written on silk. But paper was cheaper, so books became more readily available. This helped spread education in China. The invention of paper also affected Chinese government. Formerly, all government documents had been recorded on strips of wood. Paper was much more convenient to use for record keeping, so Chinese bureaucracy expanded. Another technological advance was the collar harness for horses. This invention allowed horses to pull much heavier loads than did the harness being used in Europe at the time. The Chinese perfected a plow that was more efficient because it had two blades. They also improved iron tools, invented the wheelbarrow, and began to use water mills to grind grain.



Papermaking

People in ancient China wrote on pottery, bones, stone, silk, wood, and bamboo. Then, about 2,000 or more years ago, the Chinese invented paper. They began to use plants, such as hemp, to make thin paper. In A.D. 105, Ts'ai Lun, a Han official, produced a stronger paper by mixing mulberry bark and old rags with hemp fiber.

The art of papermaking slowly spread to the rest of the world. First, it moved east to Korea and Japan. Then, it spread westward to the Arab world in the 700s, and from there to Europe.